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Thailand: Challenges to Political Stability

An Intelligence Assessment

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Political Stability	

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An Intelligence Assessment

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Key Judgments

Although the likelihood of radical change is remote, each element of Thailand's tripartite leadership—the Army, the monarchy, and the civilian bureaucracy—faces major challenges in the coming decade that threaten to dilute traditionally high levels of authority and prestige.

The politically preeminent Thai Army, long marked by clique rivalry is beginning to develop factions with ideological bents. At the same time, a small but growing number of officers seem willing to press the Army leadership to reduce its heavy involvement in politics and devote more effort to making the armed forces highly professional. This group is likely to grow. The serious external threat posed by Vietnam has strengthened the appeal of this group within the officer ranks. Most Thai military leaders also recognize that even a minor defeat at the hands of the Vietnamese would damage the Army's political legitimacy in the eyes of many Thai.

The current monarch's great popularity and personal qualities enable him to play a key role in moderating national crises. The lack of an equally capable successor, however, suggests that the power of the monarchy and its stabilizing influence will decline with succession. Moreover, the independence of the Palace from the military is likely to decrease, and the Army's political power will probably grow despite the wishes of certain junior officers that the military remain aloof from politics.

Over the next decade the Thai civilian bureaucracy must begin to resolve several emerging economic problems. Inadequate food production and the growing scarcity of land will become serious by the 1990s and could cause unprecedented dislocation to the peasant culture. The deep political passivity that this culture fosters among the rural population is the bedrock upon which all Thai regimes rest. Disruption of this foundation would ultimately—in the 1990s or beyond—destabilize the Thai political system.

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Thailand: Challenges to Political Stability] 25%		
Thailand's internal stability is based on the preeminent power, ideological cohesiveness, and flexibility of the ruling elite and on the political passivity of the majority of Thai. This paper examines these foundations and the challenges they face. It then assesses the prospects for continued stability in the 1980s and provides a checklist of indicators of potential threats to the political status quo. Small, Powerful, and Cohesive Leadership Class The military, the monarchy, and the civilian bureaucracy have exercised joint leadership of Thailand for nearly a century, effectively blocking the development of competing political institutions. Generally conservative, their hierarchical structure conforms to Thai cultural mores, and their practices help sustain commonly held Thai values rooted in tradition, nationalism, and the free enterprise system (see table 1). The Military. The Thai armed forces have been the	politicians, have been the most powerful political group since the early 1950s. The Army's political voice, the result of a series of successful coups, is enhanced by the control it has established and maintained in financial, administrative, and educational arenas. During much of the period since the 1932 coup, Army officers have occupied a number of high government positions, including that of Prime Minister. Until recently, they were strongly represented on the boards of large state and private corporations and headed many state-controlled corporations. The prominence of military leadership also reflects the dearth of experienced, well-known, or respected civilian politicians. This is partly due to the long periods of authoritarian military rule, which discouraged meaningful civilian political participation and robbed most emerging politicians of the necessary political and administrative experience. Most senior civilian career officials do not appear to resent the dominance of military men in executive positions.		
dominant political institution since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in a bloodless coup in 1932. Political power and authority flow almost exclusively from government, and the Thai military, with its clear hierarchical organization, discipline, and coercive resources, is effective in dealing with civilian political opposition. Equally important, the military has the will for forceful intervention in pursuit of its personal, institutional, and national goals. In contrast, the civilian institutions—including all political parties, special interest groups, and labor organizations—have generally been weak in discipline, organization, and leadership. Senior Royal Thai Army (RTA) officers, usually backed by other branches of the armed forces and supported by a wide coalition of businessmen and	The power of the military has been heightened by the political apathy of the general public and the wide-25X1 spread view—particularly in the provinces outside the Bangkok metropolitan area—that the armed forces have a right to lead the nation. Although the politically active public is growing in size and influence, especially in Bangkok, there is little likelihood of a quicker pace in the democratization of the political process. Indeed, many observers believe that the Thai continue to desire strong, decisive martial leadership. The military also gains legitimacy through its support of the monarchy, which seldom challenges the RTA's authority.		

¹ The Thai national police force is the military's principal political rival. For approximately a decade (1947-57), there was acute rivalry between military and police cliques. In the early 1950s, for example, the major conduit for US military aid to Thailand was the police, which built up a paramilitary force with tanks, planes, and artillery. As a result of clique rivalry, however, senior Thai Army officers were able to take direct control of the police until 1975.

Since that time, professional police officers have served as directors general of police and controlled police activities. The police presently have less coercive power than the Army, but the power they do have and the corrections they can draw on-notably the King with his longstanding patronage of the Border Patrol Police arouse military rivalry and suspicion.

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Table 1

Thai Political Class Structure and Characteristics

	Size and Composition	Political-Economic Influence	Common Characteristics
"Traditional" Elite	Estimated at less than 100 families; senior military, royal family, some royalists, but few national politicians or bureaucrats. Slow growth in size since 1932.	Manipulates all lower political groups. Only portion of group in power at one time; few ideological differences; enjoy great prestige and status. Extraordinary concentration of wealth derived largely from expansion of agriculture over 30 years.	 High education; university degree, distinguished group; top members have Western education. High degree of Westernization. Readily employed in government; jobs provide status and prestige. Few collect great wealth. Vested interests in political and economic systems. Conservative/pragmatic vs. radical/speculative. Majority in Bangkok; little contact with villagers; poor perception of rural problems.
"New" Elite	Large number senior military, plus highest graded civil servants; majority of national politicians; some powerful Sino-Thai businessmen; few royalists. Development of group dates from late 1800s; rapid expansion over past decade.	Strong ties to "traditional" elite cliques; controlled by top groups. Tainted by corruption. Moderate to low political influence. Public life focuses on clique struggles for official positions and associated economic advantages.	
"Political Public"	Educated, articulate urban dwellers. Provincial leaders well represented. Small portion of total urban population but, with growth of educational opportunities, has grown steadily over past 30 years.	Thailand's middle class. Do not have elite status. Traditionally prefer occupations in bureaucracy, but commerce and industry increasingly attractive. Majority complacent about political system. Vulnerable to deterioration of urban economy. Able to make unified demands on government, but overall political influence is low.	
Nonpolitical Urban Population	Overwhelming majority of urban dwellers.	Little political interest; no political influence. Make few demands on elite system. Hold low-payment jobs. Small fraction in organized labor.	

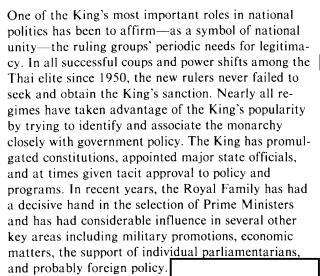
The Palace. Nationwide respect for the monarchy is one of the principal factors for stability in Thailand (see figure 1). The vast majority of Thai believe that the most effective leadership is a fusion of royal legitimacy and military power that keeps the peace and allows life to go on in an orderly manner. This attitude, coupled with King Bhumibol Aduladej's

personal prestige, has made the monarch the strongest unifying element in the Thai sociopolitical scene and enabled him to play a conciliatory role during national crises.

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Figure 1. King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit



Outside the political arena, the popular stature of the monarchy among the Thai masses has grown greatly since Bhumibol's 1950 coronation. Thai affection for the King has been deliberately cultivated by him and reflects his determination to be involved in shaping rural Thailand's economic and social development. The King's main vehicle for involvement has been personal contact with the peasants through sponsorship of numerous economic, agricultural, and social projects (see figure 2). In this way, he has conveyed the impression of devotion to public service, made the monarchy appear accessible to its subjects, and fostered a strong bond with the common citizen. His



Figure 2. The Monarch in a favorite role: visiting rural areas to oversee Palace-sponsored development projects

overriding concern appears to be that economic and political change proceed at a moderate pace—an outlook that often aligns him with conservative forces.

The Bureaucracy. The civil bureaucracy is inefficiently organized, lacks coordination among its various ministries, has no strong political constituency of its own, and traditionally subordinates itself to whatever regime is in power. Nevertheless, career officials have provided continuity to the government during the frequent changes in constitutional and political order in recent years. Despite political changes at the top and the frequent rotation of ministers, the apparatus of the public service has been preserved. The bureaucracy has been particularly successful in providing administrative continuity at the provincial and local level. This has allowed the civil service to develop considerable experience and expertise, giving it a virtual monopoly on governmental competence

The bureaucracy influences the formulation and implementation of government policies. Upper level civil servants set standards for program development, help determine policy, and provide considerable general guidance to the Thai regimes. Development programs are almost always conceptualized in the bureaucracy because the few organized, independent interest, professional, and academic groups have little government influence.

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The bureaucracy's expansion over the past several
decades has acted as a social safety valve, absorbing
the educated Thai and giving them a vested interest in
the elite system. It has thus reduced antielite pressure
by the most articulate social groups.

Widespread Political Passivity

The political passivity of the overwhelming majority of the population is one of the most salient features of Thai society. This passivity is based on cultural, historical, and socioeconomic factors that include the peasants' relative prosperity and economic independence, traditional lack of interest in governmental affairs, and fear of challenging the elites' power to govern.

Peasants make up about 80 percent of the population and are the foundation of the social structure. Although large numbers of rural Thai remain very poor and wide areas have not greatly benefited from Thailand's economic progress over the past few decades, most Thai live a relatively secure, stable, and economically tenable life in which the government plays only a small part. Moreover, the Thai population traditionally has made few demands on the government—even the local government. Rural Thai expect and desire modernization but do not believe that some catastrophic event—such as a revolution—is required to produce the necessary changes

The Thai masses have never insisted that the leadership be democratized or that the structure of society be transformed. Thai culture itself is an obstacle to making strong and coordinated demands on the government. Many cultural values, attitudes, and patterns of action appear to work against the development of a widespread and effective democratic political process (see table 2).

Challenges to the Thai Elite System

The military, the Palace, and the bureaucracy each face unprecedented challenges and pressures that could increase in severity by the 1990s:

 The military must reduce divisiveness in its ranks and cope with demands for greater professionalism arising from the Vietnamese threat in Kampuchea.

Table 2

Cultural Factors Contributing to Rural Stability in Thailand

Lack of opportunity to participate politically

Thailand has no history of village-based political organizations and processes. Although modern communications have spread political messages from urban areas in recent years, the bulk of the country's population remains conservative.

Tradition of individualism

Throughout Thai culture there is a strong sense of individualism, which permits the Thai to enter and sustain relationships on a quid pro quo basis and to break these ties whenever they feel such action is in their self interest. This tradition inhibits the formation of parties and other interest groups.

Buddhism

Approximately 95 percent of the Thai population is Buddhist. Thai Buddhism tends to discourage the Thai from engaging in social or political organizations. The religion stresses freedom from entanglements with society.

Social Order

Respect for the social hierarchy is highly valued in Thai culture, and students are taught to maintain the major institutions of the country, particularly the monarchy.

Popular political parties

Thailand lacks an effective competitive political party system and does not possess a single mass party with roots in rural areas. The typical Thai villager considers politics and government beyond his responsibility.

Youthful population

The youthfulness of the population may impede the development of political consciousness. Approximately 80 percent of Thai are under 40 years of age; nearly 40 percent are less than 15 years old. Politics, at least in the rural areas, is considered an activity for the older members of Thai society.

- The monarchy must deal with the problems of its future role as an influential political institution and of succession by heirs who appear much less capable than the current King.
- The most potentially difficult challenges to the bureaucracy, as well as to other members of the Thai elite, are complex rural demographic and development-related problems, some of which are new to Thailand.

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Divisiveness in the Army. The events leading to the "April Fool's Day" coup attempt in 1981, and reports on its aftermath, indicate that divisiveness within the military—particularly the Army—has been growing for some time. Up to the early 1970s, the dominance and power of the Army were enhanced by the homogeneity of aspirations and outlook of its members. Although the RTA has long been separated into cliques, the issues dividing them were typically personality centered rather than ideological. There now appear to be serious divisions over domestic political policy and the proper national role of the armed forces. These divisions threaten the military's future as a political power, its cohesiveness on national policies, and its ability to defend Thailand's sovereignty. A major split appears to exist between the senior and junior military levels, which has produced considerable tension and frustration within the ranks. There is little hard information on the issues and characteristics that separate the groups The junior officers criticize the commitment of their seniors to the status quo. The junior officers have been the revolution in military technology. This has heightened their awareness of Thailand's need for economic.

seniors to the status quo. The junior officers have been widely exposed to advanced political systems and to the revolution in military technology. This has heightened their awareness of Thailand's need for economic political, and technical advancement. Because they are called upon to perform civilian roles basic to advanced societies, the more politically conscious officers are further educated to the need for substantial changes in Thai society.

The Vietnamese Threat. The unification of Vietnam under Communist rule and the occupation of Laos and Kampuchea by regular North Vietnamese troops realize the worst Thai fears. The RTA's competence to defend the nation against an external attack has never been tested and now is being questioned in military as well as civilian circles.

The Thai armed forces have made major improvements in the past decade but still suffer many shortcomings, particularly in organization and some areas

Table 3

Characteristics and Attitudes of Senior and Junior Thai Officers

Senior Military

Members of the political elite; participants in several coups. Insiders who reap rewards of office, prestige, and wealth.

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Intermarried with leading families; members of corporate boards.

Opposed to radical change; some lead ultraconservative pressure groups.

Participants in high-level military rivalries, which are a key source of political tension in the Thai Government. Cohesion traditionally weak because members have never perceived outside group threat.

Stationed in Bangkok, divorced from problems of modernization of rural Thailand.

Junior Military

Skeptical of historical role of RTA in politics; question future relationship of civilian and military elements in the Thai political system.

Critical of senior military's lack of competence.

Often identify closely with the leadership of other emerging nations.

Received extensive training in the United States in programs that have brought great change to the structure and purpose of Thai armed forces.

More professionally qualified than their superiors

Frustrated over "bottlenecked" promotions caused by senior military extensions past mandatory retirement age.

Share a sense of embarrassment over poor fighting quality of a number of RTA elements; blame senior officers' preoccupation with politics.

Stationed in rural areas, appreciate problems emerging there.

of training. The military has produced highly qualified officers, but the preoccupation of its upper echelons with politics rather than with military efficiency has created an armed forces structure ill prepared to resist an external foe.

A serious defeat by the Vietnamese along the Thai-Kampuchea border—for example, the destruction of a Thai regiment—would badly shake the legitimacy of the RTA with civilian politicians and the more educated public. The urban population would be particularly critical of the military. Many residents of Bangkok believe that the April Fool's Day coup showed that the armed forces have serious weaknesses and that the military should leave the political arena and strive to become more professional.

A major catastrophe—such as an invasion and occupation of parts of Thailand—would create an almost irresistible demand for increased professionalism and would probably lead to demands for a more highly authoritarian system that ranked national security above economic and political development. Prior to the recent coup attempt, the Young Turks and the Democratic Officers, two of the most important junior officer factions at the time, had similiar views on the role of the military.

Key leaders of the Young Turks currently are discredited because of their coup attempt, but the issues and positions they espoused—some of which were borrowed from the Democratic Officers—remain popular. The shadowy Democratic Officers faction remains intact.

The Succession Issue. Since his coronation in 1950, King Bhumibol's actions clearly indicate his determination to use his considerable political influence, thereby abandoning the monarchy's traditional aloofness from politics. His successful injection of the Palace into the political world may have led the Kingdom to expect too much of the monarchy, setting a standard that could prove unsustainable by successors.

Because of the lack of a qualified successor, the sudden death or incapacitation of the King during the next few years would almost certainly substantially lessen the influence and prestige of the monarchy. At a minimum, there would be a temporary power vacuum at the Palace because none of the heirs—one son and two daughters—has the experience and stature necessary to play an effective conciliatory role in the inevitable national crisis (see figure 3). A continued failure of the monarchy to function effectively would lead to a decline in nationwide respect and ultimately to a weakening of the Palace's unifying capacity.

Queen Sirikit is unlikely to fill a power vacuum created by the King's death. In contrast to the King, she has no strong power base of her own in the Army, even though she actively supports some generals.



Figure 3. Thailand's Royal Family. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn is at far left, behind her younger sister. The Crown Prine and his wife are on the right e Hindu (

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Peasant Economic Problems. The relatively prosperous economic conditions that have reinforced the traditional passivity of the rural population are likely to erode over the next decade. In particular, Thai agriculture, faced with a growing scarcity of cultiva-	increase such credit. For example, the Government's Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives, which was created in 1966 to improve credit availability, has benefited only a handful of farmers, and the private banks continue to give priority to their urban customers. Most farmers have little contact with formal lending agencies and prefer to obtain relatively small loans through family members—often at little or no interest—or through local money lenders or land speculators.	2 2 2
ble land, will be strained to meet domestic food demands through the 1980s. Over the next 10 years, the Thai population is expected to increase by approximately 15 million people to more than 55 million. Under existing farming methods, arable land is inadequate to meet the needs of the projected population. Ideally the Thai need 2.5 rai 2 per capita. With a population growth of 3.2 percent annually, cultivated land will decrease to 1.2 rais per person in 1990, compared with 2.2 rais in 1970 and 3.0 rais in 1960. Hence, the yield per unit of land must be increased to meet future food demand and to create enough jobs to absorb the 30-percent increase in the labor force projected by the end of the 1980s. Prospects for greatly increasing Thai agricultural productivity during this period are dim, given the difficulties and costs of extending irrigation, promot-	families are tenants and 500,000 are landless. Approximately 1 million families are attempting to settle in jungle areas that are probably ill suited for sustained intensive farming. With an average rural household consisting of 5.5 individuals, more than 13 million persons may be affected by the shortage of land. Some modest land reform bills have been drafted, but no adequately funded, effective program has been put into practice. The Agricultural Land Reform Act of 1975, for example, was designed to distribute state land and private holdings in excess of eight hectares to landless laborers, tenants, and small holders in order to provide each family with a plot of four hectares. Under this act the government distributed 40,000 hectares to over 10,000 farm families, less than 0.2 percent of Thailand's nearly 6 million farm families.	2 2 2
ing the use of fertilizer, and increasing access to low-cost credit. Effective irrigation systems cover less than one-fourth of Thailand's total rice land. Consequently, the new high-yielding rice strains that require controlled watering have been planted on only a fraction of cultivable land. Double-cropping of rice is prevalent only in the fertile central plains, where relatively well-off farmers can afford the high price of fertilizers. Achievement of increased productivity and greater	Another modest land reform bill currently being debated would require the government to purchase land for redistribution Thailand Through the 1980s Although system-threatening political instability does not seem likely in the 1980s, some realignment in the	2 2 2 2
work opportunities for farmers will, at a minimum, require more government-generated credit, but Bangkok has taken only limited and inefficient steps to A rai is equivalent to 0.16 hectares.	traditional Thai power balance is almost certain. None of the potential gainers, however, appears equipped to deal with the country's gradually evolving economic problems. As a result, serious popular discontent could arise in the following decade Secret] 2

A shift in favor of the military would be most rapid should King Bhumibol die. The King's prestige would not transfer either to Prince Vachiralongkorn, whose close relationship with the RTA almost certainly would place him under some measure of military influence, or to his daughter, who lacks the power base to influence the military.

Even should the King survive the decade, the military will play a strong role in shaping policy and determining the principal changes in the direction Thailand takes. The present problems of factionalism are likely to shift away from personalities and narrow partisanship toward ideology and issues as younger officers are promoted. Even these differences could dissipate in time, since the issues separating the current junior officers seem to be less great than those separating the junior officers and their present superiors. The persistent threat from Hanoi will also mute ideological differences and strengthen the commonality of purpose within the military.

Although the military could easily strengthen its position, some of the new generation of officers appear to be less interested in political involvement than their seniors. The younger men seem primarily concerned with developing as professional soldiers and are aware of the military's limitations in running what is an increasingly complex economy.

These professionally oriented individuals may be more willing to see greater power evolve into the bureaucracy's hands, but they are a minority and will not be strong enough to initiate such a major change in Thai leadership patterns. Moreover, the senior officers can meet many of the demands for a more professional-capable military without any meaningful decrease in political activity. As a consequence, the Thai military is likely to become technically more professional in some limited areas, but with no decrease in its overall political influence.

The bureaucracy itself is not in the best position to cope with Thailand's problems even if a strengthened military were able to enforce consensus on development goals. The pattern of frequent transfers of power and of changing political leadership—there have been seven prime ministers over the past seven years—has had the cumulative effect of stifling the initiatives of

the energetic members in the bureaucracy. Despite the technical abilities and positive intentions of many of its members, the present bureaucracy lacks the appreciation of rural problems that an earlier generation of government officials had. The bureaucracy's growing elitist character has produced a commitment to maintaining the status quo that could undermine the government's ability to solve long-range economic problems capable of sparking rural unrest in the 1990s

The threshold for such unrest and its likely form are difficult to predict. It is probable, however, that the threshold itself will be less important than the presence in the rural areas of an organizing force or nucleus that can articulate the farmers' problems and make unified demands on the government for them. Thailand's large and growing numbers of universityeducated students are capable of becoming this nucleus. In the 1973-76 liberal period of government, a relatively small group of determined university student leaders organized precedent-setting farmers' federations and forced the central government to at least acknowledge many of the farmers' genuine economic grievances at that time. Although students today are poorly organized and the government closely monitors their activities, many Thai leaders—including the King—consider them to be potentially the most troublesome element in Thai society.

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Indicators of Changes in the Thai Elite Structure

The most important set of indicators of stability threatening changes in the Thai elite structure concern the armed forces. The following would indicate either a basic weakening in the armed forces' ability to provide strong and unified leadership or a decline in their legitimacy:

- A growing split between officers over the issue of the military's heavy involvement in politics.
- Increasing numbers of professional soldiers who express doubts about their ability to run the country.
- Greater sentiment among professional soldiers that coups are not an appropriate means of changing governments.

 Deep dissatisfaction among junior officers that, despite external threats, senior officers continue to be concerned with narrow political interests and to ignore the country's need for improved defense and greater professionalism within the military.

There is considerable speculation on how smoothly the country would operate in the absence of an effective monarch. Several indicators might point toward a diminished role for the throne as a stabilizing force in national crises:

- Elements of the Thai elite openly speculating on the shortcomings of the monarchy.
- Growing rumors that the monarchy should be "neutralized," captured, or held incommunicado during future coups.
- Open criticism or discussion of Prince Vachiralongkorn's relationship with the RTA.

Now, as prior to the 1932 revolution, the general population is largely politically apathetic. The growing number of educated Thai, however, could lead to increased demands for part of the spoils as did foreign-educated Thai students who started the 1932 revolution. A major symptom to look for over the next decade would be a change in the avenues of entrance into the elite. Some indicators of this might be:

- Increasing barriers preventing intellectuals from becoming members of the ruling class.
- Growing numbers of well-trained individuals who have less access to the ruling class through patronage and are unwilling to settle for semielite status.
- Formation of a "counterelite" by frustrated intellectuals, as did the 1932 plotters.

Traditional values and attitudes account for much of the stability that has marked rural Thailand. Thus, value changes—perhaps economic in origin—could indicate an erosion of the passivity of the rural population, which in turn could threaten the system. By their nature, such changes would be extremely difficult to monitor—particularly by foreigners. Monitoring attitude changes would be only slightly less difficult for the Thai civilian bureaucrats, who are not attuned to the rural social scene. The following would indicate a basic change in rural Thai society that might lead to a challenge to the current system:

- Agriculture, particularly rice cultivation, is no longer considered worthwhile and noble.
- Increased rural interest in commerce and a taste for urban life.
- Decreased emphasis on self-reliance, personal dignity, and economic independence.
- A reduced sense of discipline.
- A perception of decline in well-being in the rural areas.
- Loss of faith in the current elite system's ability to preserve the well-being in rural areas.
- A growing number of organized rural groups that make demands on local government.

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